

THE BALLAD OF READING
GAOL 423

Their uniforms were spick and span,
And they wore their Sunday suits..
But we knew the work they had been at,
By the quicklime on their boots.

For where a grave had opened wide,
There was no grave at

all:

Only a stretch of mud
and sand

By the hideous prison-
wall,

And a little heap of
burning lime.,

That the man should have his pall.

For he has a pall, this wretched man,

Such as few men can
claim:

Deep down below a
prison-yard,

Naked for greater
shame,

He lies, with fetters on
each foot,

Wrapt in a sheet of flame!

And all the while the burning lime

Eats flesh and bone
away,

It eats the brittle bone
by night,

And the soft flesh by day,
It eats the flesh and bone

by turns,

But it eats the heart away.

For three long years they will not sow

Or root or seedling there:

For three long years the
unblessed spot

Will sterile be and bare,
And look upon the

wondering sky

With unreproachful stare.

They think a murderer's heart would
taint

Each simple seed they
sow.

It is not true! God's
kindly earth

Is kindlier than men know,
And the red rose would but blow

more red,

The white rose whiter blow.

Out of his mouth a red, red rose!

Out of his heart a white!

For who can say by what
strange way,

Christ brings His will to light,

Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore

Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?